

Opening Statement of Chairman Tom Davis
Select Bipartisan Committee to Investigate the Preparation For and Response to
Hurricane Katrina
Thursday, September 22, 2005

Good morning, and welcome to the first hearing of the Select Bipartisan Committee to Investigate the Preparation For and Response to Hurricane Katrina.

It's been said that experience is the best teacher. The unfortunate thing is that the learning process is sometimes such a painful one.

Yesterday, Katrina's death toll officially passed 1,000. I can't imagine the pain and heartbreak that so many families have endured these past weeks. We owe it to them to live up to this committee's bipartisan congressional mandate, a mandate that's arrived from the American public as well.

It's a mandate to stop attacking *or* defending government entities for partisan purposes, and do the oversight we're charged with doing.

To investigate aggressively what went wrong and what went right.

To do it by the book, and let the chips fall where they may.

There is so very much to examine here. Why coordination and information sharing between local, state, and federal governments appears to have been so dismal. Whether FEMA has been organizationally undermined and under-funded.

Why all residents were not evacuated.

Why the New Orleans levee system failed.

Why relief and medical supplies and support were so slow in arriving.

And why government at all levels failed to react more effectively to a storm that was predicted with unprecedented timeliness and accuracy.

The task before us is considerable. It's too important for carping. The American people want the facts, and they're watching. They alone will judge whether the review we begin today is thorough and fair. Our final exam will be the report we are tasked with completing.

We want both Republicans and Democrats at the table to do this job right. The more voices asking tough questions the better. I have attempted over the past week to extend an olive branch to senior Democrats. To reassure them that our review will be about planning and policy and performance, not politics. About getting the facts, not getting even.

But regardless of who does and does not show up for our hearings, we have a job to do, and I'm intent on doing it right. We need to begin now, while evidence and memories are fresh.

Today's hearing is the logical first step in fulfilling our responsibilities. The resolution creating this committee was explicit: we are to conduct a full and complete investigation into local, state, and federal government preparation for, and response to, Hurricane Katrina.

So it just makes sense that we first need a record of who was told what, and when, in the days leading up to this devastating storm.

Today we will explore the timeline of Katrina progressing from a tropical depression to a major hurricane. We'll ask when warnings were issued to the public and to federal, state, and local officials. And we'll review what can be done to improve hurricane prediction in the short-term and long-term.

We have with us today two witnesses who can address these issues better than any other – Dr. Max Mayfield, Director of the National Weather Service's National Hurricane Center; and Ret. Brigadier General David Johnson, Director of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's National Weather Service.

Dr. Mayfield will be joining us via video conference, where he is monitoring Hurricane Rita 'round-the-clock as it nears landfall – and hopefully we can help him spread the word about what Rita will likely entail. If Dr. Mayfield has to cut his time short, or is interrupted, we certainly understand.

In general, Dr. Mayfield – who will testify and answer questions first, as we have him for only short period of time -- will discuss the Hurricane Center's activities and forecasts before and during Katrina's landfall. General Johnson will discuss the Weather Service's role and activities.

I want to thank my friend and colleague, Chairman Boehlert of the Science Committee, for the help and guidance he and his staff have offered in preparing my staff and me for this hearing.

We have all spent much of the past three weeks examining the aftermath of this disaster. It has become increasingly clear that local, state, and federal government agencies failed to meet the needs of the residents of Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama. Now it's our job to figure out why, and to make sure we are better prepared for the future – a future that is *now*, given Rita's imminent arrival.

We're all hoping and praying today that this does not become the Select Committee on Katrina *and* Rita.

As you all know, Rita was upgraded yesterday to category 5 intensity, and Texas is bracing for an impact that could rival Katrina's. Let's hope at least *some* lessons were learned quickly, and that this test will be met with greater success.

Based on what we now know, two federal agencies passed *Katrina's* test with flying colors – the National Weather Service and the National Hurricane Center.

Those who did escape the storm's wrath owe their lives to their accuracy. But the unfortunate reality is that even armed with solid, advance information on Katrina's severity, the response of local, state, and federal officials was largely abysmal.

It remains difficult to understand how government could respond so ineffectively to a disaster that was predicted for years, and for which specific dire warnings had been issued for days. If this is what happens when we have advance warning, I shudder to imagine the consequences when we do not.

Let me note just a few examples of the forecast's remarkable accuracy, and of top officials' unprecedented efforts to get the word out:

- * Storm-track projections released to the public **56 hours** before Katrina came ashore were off by **only 15 miles**. The average 48-hour error is 160 miles, and the average 24-hour error is 85 miles.
- * The Hurricane Center's predicted strength for Katrina at landfall, **two days before** the storm hit, was off the mark by only 10 miles per hour.
- * Dr. Mayfield personally called the governors of Mississippi and Louisiana and the mayor of New Orleans two days ahead of time to warn them of what was coming. He also gave daily pre-storm video briefings to federal officials in Washington, including top FEMA and DHS brass. **We'll want to learn more today about those conversations.**
- * The day before Katrina hit, the National Weather Service office in Slidell, Louisiana issued a warning saying, "MOST OF THE AREA WILL BE UNINHABITABLE FOR WEEKS...PERHAPS LONGER...HUMAN SUFFERING INCREDIBLE BY MODERN STANDARDS."

Forecast-related questions and challenges remain, of course. Some experts say that while forecasters today can more effectively predict a storm's path, they remain limited in their ability to gauge intensity, rainfall, and water level surges. Some say we need more investment in sensors and computer modeling.

But the fact remains that Katrina's strength and the potential disaster it could bring were made clear well in advance through briefings and formal advisories. It remains clear that, in response, there was profound government hesitancy at all levels.

Over the next few months we'll try to figure out why.

